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Israel irked by US scrutiny

Distress is over US Customs raid, spy investigation

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Recent incidents have underscored for the Israelis — again — the double-edged nature of their complex and close relationship with the United States.

The timing and publicity given to US Customs Service raids last Thursday on an American firm suspected of illegally transferring military equipment and technology to Israel has caused anger and bitterness among officials here. Israel yesterday expressed official "astonishment" that it had been implicated in these raids.

The raids occurred the day after US investigators began questioning Israeli officials on their involvement in the Jonathan Jay Pollard spy affair and also one day after Israel formally submitted its request to the US for \$3.5 billion in military and economic aid for fiscal 1987.

"It's the mood of a lot of people around here that right now there is a campaign by certain elements in the US administration against us," said one Israeli official, who spoke on condition he not be named.

In a Cabinet statement Sunday, the government said it had asked the Reagan administration for an explanation for the Customs raids on the Connecticut, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania locations of Napco Inc. This company has contracted to supply Israel with the technology to make a new barrel for a tank cannon.

Last week, the Israelis were clearly on the defensive about the Pollard case, after Prime Minister Shimon Peres had issued a qualified apology to the US Dec. 1 and the team of American investigators arrived here Wednesday.

But the Israelis now are signaling that they believe the Customs raids went too far.

"It's very serious that the campaign is continuing. Now on every corner in the US people will be saying that Israel is spying on the US," said the official.

This view, however, is not unanimous in this deeply divided coalition government. Sources close to Prime Minister Peres said they do not believe that there is any orchestration "at the level of senior officials" in the US to discredit Israel.

"In fact, an effort to contain the problem is being made on the part of the highest levels," said one source, who dismissed the Customs raids as the result of "some overzealous official in Customs . . . who blew it."

Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin reportedly told US Ambassador Thomas Pickering on Friday that Israel had "acted legally and openly" in its dealings with Napco, and that "the implication of Israel in the affair is cause for astonishment."

"The minister said that an agreement was signed between the Israeli Military Industries and the American firm in December 1984," said Cabinet spokesman Yossi Beilin. He also said that the US office of Defense approved the acquisition by Israel of a US-designed chromium-plating process.

Israeli Ambassador Meir Rosenne met with US Undersecretary of State Michael Armacost Friday, and Israeli Defense Ministry officials talked to Pentagon officials. The Israelis reportedly stressed that American firms contracting to sell sensitive technology are obliged to obtain permission from the State Department.

One expert who formerly purchased weapons technology for Israel in the US stressed the importance of the technology and intelligence exchanges that he said have benefitted both nations over the years.

"One of the major contributions the United States has made to us recently is on the Lavie fighter plane," the source said. "But both sides are exchanging a lot of information in many areas."

But an Israeli official said it "added nothing to the dignity and integrity of Israel as a state" last week to publicly submit its request for \$1.2 billion in economic aid and \$2.3 billion in military grants to the US.

"On the one hand, we're very unhappy about the [Napco] case and the [Pollard] investigation and on the other hand we're saying, 'Look, we don't have much choice because they're supporting us with \$3.5 billion a year,' " the official said.